

Elsie Penfound - Tribute

In 1993 Elsie's sister Ann prepared a "This is Your Life" book to celebrate Elsie and her husband George's fiftieth wedding anniversary. This book, together with Julia's memories of her mum, have been an enormous help in preparing this tribute.

Elsie Victory Johns was born in Plymouth on 28th June 1919. Her parents were Lionel and Elsie and she was the middle child in a family of five. She had two older brothers: Bill and Dick, and two younger sisters: Sybil and Ann.

Elsie's early years were hard. The family lived in the Barbican, which was very different to the way it is now. It was such a rough area that policemen used to patrol in three's, particularly when the pubs were chucking out.

At some point Elsie's father disappeared from the scene and her mother was left to bring up the family alone. Money was so scarce that occasionally she had to resort to burning the furniture to keep the children warm.

Elsie, who was an artistic child, had dreams of going to Art College, but this was not practical for a girl from her background. Instead she left school at fourteen and began working as a waitress.

With the advent of the war Plymouth became a target for air raids. Elsie remembered reporting for work one day only to find that the restaurant had been bombed, with just one wall left standing. High above her, hanging on the remaining wall, was her apron, fluttering in the breeze. Elsie was completely dismayed – not because the restaurant was gone, but because the apron was out of reach and all of her tips were in the pocket.

To get away from the blitz Elsie's family moved to St Germans where they stayed with relatives at Wilton Farm. Elsie was a really pretty young woman and George Penfound, who lived next door, was greatly taken with her. Initially Elsie wasn't very impressed, but gradually George grew on her and the romance blossomed. On February 6th 1943 Elsie and George were married at St Germans church. The wedding was celebrated in style back at the farm, where the barn was cleared and a piano brought in to help the festivities go with a swing.

The couple settled at Wilton Cottage, but married bliss was short-lived because in 1944 Elsie caught a bad chill, and became seriously ill with suspected tuberculosis. She was taken to Didworthy Sanatorium in Plymouth where she spent the next twelve months, with George travelling in to visit her as often as he could.

Eventually Elsie returned to Wilton Cottage and, early in 1945, was able to report to the Sanatorium Superintendent that she was putting on weight, which was considered to be a good sign of recovery.

The war ended. Elsie's brother Bill returned from the army, married Vera and the couple came to live at Wilton Farm. But in October 1945 Elsie's mum died and Elsie became the legal guardian of her younger sister, Ann, who was just nine years old. It was hard work making ends meet – George was paid just twenty seven shillings a week for his work on the farm, five shillings of which went on rent – but these were happy times with everyone mucking in together.

In June 1946 baby John arrived and quickly captured everyone's heart with his blond hair and blue eyes. Six years later, in 1952, Julia was born and the family was complete.

In 1953 they moved to Sheviocke and George went to work at Sconnor Farm. The new house was much more modern than Wilton Cottage with a tiled grate, electric lamps and a cooker with electric rings. George bought himself a motorbike to travel to work, and Elsie always knew when to put the kettle on as she would hear the pop-pop-pop of the bike which meant that George was on his way home.

George rented some land so that he could grow vegetables to feed the family. As you can see from the photograph on the service sheet, Elsie was only too happy to help get the land ready for planting potatoes, pulling the plough whilst George followed behind.

Elsie threw herself into village life. It was always open house at the Penfound's and Harry - the local baker – could regularly be found there having his breakfast. At Christmas the roast would be put into the oven and then the family would go out visiting with neighbours and drinking a glass of sherry in every house. Elsie entered her homemade wines and pasties in the local flower and produce show and won prizes on a regular basis. She loved fancy dress and made hats and costumes to enter in the local carnival.

Although Elsie never went out to work she contributed to the family's income by working from home. She cleaned the local phone box, made pottery owls and elephants for Tremar Pottery, and became a Gratton agent, winning a Gold Medal for outstanding sales, which she achieved by ordering clothes and putting on fashion shows to tempt her customers.

Elsie was a fantastic mother who was always there when her children needed her. On one occasion Julia came home from primary school and found the door locked. When Elsie returned she found Julia breaking her heart on the doorstep and it was hard to say which of them was the most distraught – Julia because there was no-one in or Elsie because, on this one occasion, she'd not been at home.

School summer holidays were spent at the beach. During the week Elsie would leave George his tea and take John and Julia to Whitsands Bay. At

the weekend the whole extended family would get together and go on trips all over Cornwall.

Elsie wanted her children to have the opportunities that she had never had and, when Julia had the opportunity to go to Grammar School, Elsie convinced George that it was worth paying the extra. Later, when Julia started singing in folk clubs, Elsie would come with her, declaring herself to be Julia's biggest fan. Both John and Julia stayed at home until they got married, which must be a tribute to the happy home life they enjoyed.

After fourteen years of living in tied cottages Elsie decided that it was time to buy a house. George's reaction to this was "Who do you think we are? Royalty?" but Elsie was undeterred. A nearby cottage, with a sitting tenant, came on the market and somehow Elsie and George scraped together the £200 needed to buy it. When the tenant moved out they started to do up the house, which had been left in a real state. Later, when George lost his job at Sconnor Farm and started work with Cornwall Highways, they had to move out of their tied house. It was due to Elsie's foresight that they had a home to go to.

In 1970 George and Elsie bought their first car. There was a little more money to spare and, for the first time, they could afford to have holidays. They went camping at Perran Sands where Elsie and Ann entered the fancy dress competition and won a prize.

As the seventies went on first John and then Julia got married and in 1976 Elsie's first grandchild – Neil – arrived. He was followed by his sister Carly and Elsie threw herself into being a grandmother.

The next big change in George and Elsie's life came in 1981 when they bought a caravan. They became active members of the Devon and Cornwall Caravan Club and were often to be found stewarding rallies or helping out on working parties. This brought them a whole new social life, which Elsie loved.

When George retired in 1988 a whole new phase of their life began. From April to September he and Elsie were hardly ever at home – travelling around the country and meeting up with friends at rallies. They never went abroad – Elsie felt that this was such a fantastic country that there was no need to go anywhere else.

These happy times came to an abrupt end when George became ill. As Elsie had never learnt to drive they moved to Saltash to stay with Ann so that they could be closer to the health services. After George died Elsie decided that she didn't want to return to Sheviocke and she bought the house next door to her sister. Without her friends, and the social life that she'd had through the caravan clubs, her life became much narrower. She greatly enjoyed her visits to Julia in Somerset and a high point of her year was the Beercrocombe and Curry Mallet Christmas show. I remember Elsie sitting in the audience, for both nights of the show, loudly applauding Julia when she came onto the stage with her guitar.

Later, when Julia bought a campervan, Elsie's became her enthusiastic travelling companion, setting out on a two-week trip to Scotland in the van at the age of 89.

As Elsie's health started to deteriorate it became clear that she needed more support than Ann, John and Julia were able to give her. In 2011 she moved into St Anne's Care Home. Being surrounded by people, with plenty going on, was just what Elsie needed and she threw herself into the life of the home. She won a pasty making competition on St Pirran's day, got into the photographs when the Olympic Torch came to St Anne's and danced whenever the opportunity presented itself. She was very popular with the staff and residents and everyone made time to come and visit her during the last few days of her life. She died with Julia beside her.

Elsie will be remembered for her irrepressible spirit, her willingness to get stuck in and help out and her great love of life. She will be greatly missed by all those who knew her. As one of the staff at St Anne's said: "If only we'd had thirty-three Elsie's".

Julia has chosen a poem which, she feels, particularly reflects her mum's legacy.

"If there is happiness in our hearts,
It's because you helped put it there.
If there is a gentleness in our beliefs,
It's because you showed us how to care.
If there is understanding in our thinking,
It's because you shared your wisdom.
If there is a rainbow over our shoulder,
It's because of your outlook and your vision.
If there is a knowledge that we can reach out -
And we really can make some dreams come true -
It's because we learned from the best teacher of all.
We learned... from you."

Anon